

AMOSSHE Future of Student Life & Services Series



Discussion paper: 'Are Students Always Fit to Study?'

Introduction

1. As part of its policy work, AMOSSHE hosts a series of strategy and policy discussions, the '**Future of Student Life & Services.**' The third Future of Student Life & Services event, a **policy tea** took place from 2.30-4.00pm on **Thursday 30 May 2013** at the Radisson Blu Hotel in Birmingham. The topic was 'Are Students Always Fit to Study' and Ben Lewis, AMOSSHE Chair and Head of Student Advisory Services at Cardiff University chaired the discussion. Participants included representatives from professional bodies in higher education (HE), policy advisors, commercial service providers, and heads of Student Services for HE providers (HEIs).
2. Participants debated a set of questions put forward by AMOSSHE members:
 - a. Should we be discussing 'Fitness to Study' or should we be addressing 'Student Academic Engagement'?
 - b. Some students start undergraduate studies 'in pieces,' hoping that we can put them together. Is that our job? Should those students be granted or denied access to our services?
 - c. Are students always fit to look after themselves on campus? Should university residences be subject to different tenancy laws than other properties?
 - d. Should financial competency be a core requirement in determining students' fitness-to-study?
3. This paper outlines the themes explored during 'Are Students Always Fit to Study?' It attempts to bring together the range of topics considered during the forum meeting. The paper does not represent AMOSSHE's, or indeed any of the groups in attendance', policy stances or convictions. The paper is intended as a record of the issues considered and a starting point for further conversations.
4. The session concluded that HE providers are not solely responsible for a students' fitness-to-study; ultimately it is the students' responsibility to be fit-to-study. However, there are many reasonable adjustments that providers must, and do, make to support fitness-to-study and fitness to contribute to an academic and HE community. The distinctions between elements of fitness and discipline are often murky. Higher education providers might do well to disentangle 'pure' matters of fitness-to-study from other matters of students' fitness to conduct day-to-day life.

Discussion

The purpose of higher education

5. At its most simplistic level, the intended outcome of most students' participation in HE is to complete and pass their course of study. There are tensions between this and what has become a mixed fitness-to-study landscape. A student might be academically engaged but not fit-to-study; conversely a student might be fit-to-study but choose not to engage academically.
6. A function of HE is to prepare students for life following and outside of their academic engagement. There are difficulties in determining, though, how fit-for-life students need to be in order to be fit-to-study. Support providers have to take complex decisions about which life skills students might be expected to demonstrate versus which life skills might generally be acquired and through what means during their HE experience.

What is, or might be, reasonable

7. Some institutions are moving toward a structure whereby they put in place individual contracts with those students presenting greatest fitness-to-study concerns. This tends to be a final attempt at supporting a student, often if reasonable adjustments have proved insufficient. Contracts will often focus around a student's commitment to academic engagement and endeavour rather than 'pure' fitness-to-study. It does not seem that such contracts have yet been challenged through the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), but as their use becomes more widespread, there may be complaints which lead to rulings and precedents for individual student contracting.
8. In a 'marketised' HE sector, there is some sense that students have higher expectations about support offers than in the past. In some cases, students with severe fitness-to-study concerns make assumptions of and demands on their HE provider to guarantee shelter and nutrition if the student themselves is personally unable to meet these basic needs. Outside of a university community, it is unlikely that such demands would be met without social welfare; it might be unreasonable to assume that HE providers should always 'bail out' students in trouble.
9. HE is not a therapeutic community, yet many institutions deliver wellbeing services at a level not provided outside of the HE sector. There are suggestions that other communities recommend HE as a solution to individual problems, without acknowledging that there will be fitness-to-study repercussions. HEIs can then be drawn into having to deliver resource intensive fitness-to-study support, which may not always be the best way to equip individuals to address their fitness-to-live problems.
10. Fitness-to-study and disciplinary processes are often at odds when considering student behaviours. Addressing negative behaviours may be masked rather than addressed by turning to fitness-to-study, when in reality they are disciplinary matters that affect other students or parts of the HE community. This is particularly pertinent in matters of student accommodation: a student may be fit-to-study academically, but if they are not fit-to-live in communal residences such as halls, the interplay of accommodation and support services becomes very complicated.

Disabilities

11. Fitness-to-study policies are disproportionately focused on health, and in particular, mental health. These are key areas of concern for Student Services, although adjustments for disability and other health related matters are not necessarily fitness-to-study matters per se; they are part of HE providers' duty of care and obligations under the Equality Act 2010.
12. There can be gross mismatches between what a needs assessor recommends, what DSAs can support, and what an HEI can logistically support for disabled students. The concept of reasonable adjustments needs to be contextualised to local situations.
13. The sensitivity of supporting students with mental health issues can, on occasion, result in HEIs overly invoking fitness-to-study support and being reluctant to draw on disciplinary processes. HEIs need to be clearer, and sometimes bolder, in turning to the relevant disciplinary policies when needed. The sector must consider risk not only to those students exhibiting fitness-to-study concerns but also to the wider student community.

Financial competency

14. Many people not in HE experience issues with financial competency. HE support services often provide greater support or flexibility for users struggling with financial illiteracies than other parts of society. It may be unfair to treat students who are not financially competent differently to how other people who are not financially competent. Fitness-to-study issues should not necessarily relate to fitness to budget, but may be difficult to disentangle from a wider set of fitness issues.
15. Because of notions of care and support for students, there are occasions where HEIs may be lenient on students who do not meet their financial obligations, eg, accommodation services and campus tenancies. Whilst extending an unpaid student tenancy might seem to be in immediate fitness-to-study interests, it can enable students to be financially incompetent and encourage debts to spiral. This can create different fitness-to-study concerns by creating debt management needs for students. It could be beneficial for HE accommodation providers to behave more like private landlords in applying stringent payment conditions to their residential services.

Final comments and observations

16. HE participation is a formative experience for all student groups, and in many cases, universities have a legal responsibility to enable those experiences. More than that, HE is often perceived as a social good and wellbeing expectations are placed on HE that might not be normally expected of other post compulsory education settings.
17. There are many elements to fitness-to-study, several of which are at the edges of academic engagement and may not be purely study related. Students presenting with fitness concerns may have support needs of physical or psychological wellbeing, disability or other health needs, financial competency, or even social capabilities. Many of these concerns would not receive such high levels of support outside of HE.

18. The session concluded that HE providers are not solely responsible for a students' fitness-to-study; ultimately it is the students' responsibility to be fit-to-study. However, there are many reasonable adjustments that providers must, and do, make to support fitness-to-study and fitness to contribute to an academic and HE community. The distinctions between elements of fitness and discipline are often murky. Higher education providers might do well to disentangle 'pure' matters of fitness-to-study from other matters of students' fitness to conduct day-to-day life.

Editor's note: AMOSSHE

1. AMOSSHE is the UK HE Student Services Organisation. AMOSSHE informs and supports the leaders of student services, and represents, advocates for, and promotes the student experience. 150 HE providers are members of AMOSSHE with some 500 named individuals associated with membership.
2. AMOSSHE is critical to the Student Services landscape and policy discussion because:
 - a. AMOSSHE members shape the student experience in HE;
 - b. AMOSSHE empowers Student Service leaders; and
 - c. AMOSSHE is a key voice of student experience leaders.
3. AMOSSHE advocates for Student Services leaders and ensures that their voice is heard on key policy and strategic development issues in HE. AMOSSHE provides timely policy briefing for members on all major developments relating to the student experience, and submits influential responses to national consultations. All consultation responses are available at www.amosshes.org.uk under 'Publications.'